

# Pronunciation & Grammar: Using Video and Audio Activities

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*By Maria Parker*

Opinion on the best way to do something varies and changes over time, and the pedagogy of pronunciation is no exception. Depending on their perspective, educators may perceive the appropriate role of pronunciation in the ESL/EFL curriculum to be nonexistent, or useful but not critical, or highly desirable (Morley 1994). Similarly, theories about the most effective methods for teaching pronunciation and helping students improve their comprehensibility include pattern drills, the audiovisual method, fluency over accuracy, a focus on segmentals and on suprasegmentals, and combinations thereof (Gilbert 1990, Celce-Murcia, Brinton, and Goodwin 1996).

Current opinion regarding ESL pedagogy in general, and pronunciation in particular, has at least two generally accepted theoretical cornerstones. The suprasegmental features of English—stress, rhythm, intonation, linking, reduction, and deletion—are called prosodies. These contribute more to meaning and overall listener perception of nonnative speaker (NNS) fluency than do the segmentals, the individual vowel and consonant sounds. Although rules for suprasegmental use exist, these rules are broader and have much more variation than is involved in learning articulation of the individual sounds. Because suprasegmentals carry more meaning and are harder to learn, they require more focused, structured attention and more practice than the segmentals (Hall 1997, Celce-Murcia, Brinton, and Goodwin 1996).

Second, pronunciation taught in isolation does not carry over to improved pronunciation in actual communication (Morley 1991). This is true for both the segmental features and the suprasegmental elements. Many readers will have had the experience of practicing the /th/ sound in minimal pairs and sentences in class, only to have students say, “See you next time. Sank you,” as they leave the classroom. While there is general agreement that practicing sounds and prosodic elements in structured drills is important and useful (Brinton 1988 personal communication), more communicative activities using connected speech are crucial in helping to build automaticity and carryover.

Beyond these two theoretical points, it is also generally agreed that classroom language activities which integrate the skill areas are desirable, useful, and fun. The activities described in this article combine the practice of specific prosodic elements with selected grammar features.

This article describes and illustrates two specific sets of activities—song and video—and provides a template that readers can adapt and revise for their own populations and settings. It should be stressed that the general model can be adapted to a variety of pronunciation and grammar features.

Songs, particularly, may be chosen so that they are effective and engaging at almost any proficiency level. Song recordings and video clips are particularly useful for NNS teachers in

EFL settings. Often in such situations few native speaker models are available, and teachers sometimes lack confidence in their ability to teach pronunciation. A final benefit of these types of activities is that besides building pronunciation and grammar proficiency, they also help improve students' listening.

As noted, the suprasegmentals generally are among the most difficult features of English for nonnative speakers to recognize and acquire. The activities show one way of using song recordings and short video segments from popular television programs to practice two prosodic features: the intonation of connected speech and linking;<sup>1</sup> and the grammatical use of prepositions and phrasal verbs.

## Song

In the spring of 1999, there was an interesting exchange on the TESL electronic discussion group about the use of recorded music and songs in the classroom. The conversation focused in part on choosing currently popular songs that are appropriate in both language and content and whose lyrics are intelligible when sung. For this activity I used an older song titled, "I've Got You under My Skin" by Cole Porter, recorded by Frank Sinatra. I selected it for several reasons: the class took place at the time of Sinatra's death, so he was in the news and students had heard of him; the song is energetic and upbeat, with lyrics that are easy to understand; and it is a wonderful example of linking, which we had been studying in class. The song also has some perfect examples of the flapped /d/.<sup>2</sup> This segmental feature was as a bonus.

There are several ways to proceed, depending on the students' proficiency levels, the amount of time available, and any other constraints. The following is one set of steps:

1. Have the song playing as students enter the class and/or play it through once as a warm-up before beginning the activity.
2. Distribute typed copies of the text to the students.
3. Have students, working in pairs or small groups, mark features. For our purposes, this recording had many wonderful examples of linking and flapped /d/: my skin, deep in, give in, this affair, go so well, heart of me, part of me, reality, that I do, thought of you mentality and so forth. The inclusion of this last word is especially fortuitous, with one /t/ pronounceable as flapped /d/ and one not. Circulate to guide and answer questions as the students work.

You may also begin with a cloze listening activity. Before distributing the complete text, give students an edited version and let them fill in key words as they listen to the song.

1. At this point several variations are possible:
  - The most structured technique is to play the song again, allowing students to read along

in their text, comparing what they have marked with what they actually hear. Ask students to find instances, if any, where they predicted linking or flapped /d/ but it did not occur, or vice versa.

- Another possibility is to have individuals or pairs choose one or several words or phrases in the song to listen for specifically, before playing the song again. This variation works particularly well when students have previously disagreed about whether they expect to hear the feature. In this case, it is especially useful for developing listening proficiency to ask students to listen without reading along in the text.

In both variations, ask students to report where in the text they heard or did not hear what they expected. Did they catch the words or phrases they were listening for? Were they linked or made with flapped /d/ as expected? Follow with a whole-class discussion on what the singer did and why some segments may not have been pronounced as expected.

2. Have students practice some of the words and phrases and put them into longer phrases and sentences.
3. Play the recording one more time, asking the class to speak along, and try to match the singer in the practiced features.
4. Have students create their own short dialogues and conversations using words and expressions from the song that have the practiced features. If desired, this step can be done after step 8.
5. Bring grammar into the activity by using a cloze exercise. In the song “I’ve Got You under My Skin,” the lyrics are useful for studying and reviewing prepositions and phrasal verbs. This is not a particularly difficult exercise, and there is usually little discussion about which word to use. The benefit comes in actively recalling and writing the word and then hearing it in context. Listening to the tape again and focusing on the prepositions helps students recognize that these little words are easy to miss because they are so reduced. That is why NNS often do not hear them and, as a result, do not produce them in their own speech. The focus on listening for something that is not obvious and not stressed helps students remember that “not obvious” does not mean “not necessary,” and that including these little words is necessary not only grammatically, but rhythmically.

This song lent itself particularly to work on intonation and linking, as well as the use of prepositions and phrasal verbs. But songs in general are well suited to work on recognizing and

practicing stress and reduction. The songs individual instructors choose will depend on which features they wish to practice.

## Video

Soap operas are good sources for language skill activities of video segments because the scenes are often short, the acting and action not overly nuanced or subtle, yet the language is idiomatic and authentic. For this set of activities, I chose a segment from “Melrose Place,” a television soap opera/drama that was very popular in the United States for several years. Although the program was not necessarily popular with our students, it and others like it, are interesting from a cultural standpoint. Viewing segments can lead to fruitful discussion about how accurately the behavior on such shows reflects real life in the United States. Like songs, video clips have many uses. The following set of activities is based on a two-minute scene. Before beginning, teachers will need to prepare a transcript of the segment they want to use.

1. Play the segment once to allow students to get the general idea of the scene. A brief class discussion will ensure that everyone understands the main ideas. Since one scene, particularly a short one, typically revolves around just one main point, the main idea is usually apparent.
2. Distribute the transcript and have students mark it for whatever features have been selected for review and practice. Thought groups (also called idea units or chunking), linking, and sentence stress are well suited to this kind of analysis of connected, natural speech. However, any feature, including individual sounds, could be the focus. The teacher may ask the entire class to mark the same thing, or particular students or groups can be responsible for marking different features or different parts of the text.
3. When the students have finished, have pairs or groups report line by line, reading their assigned sentences aloud in the way they think they should sound. If the class is small enough, everyone else can listen and make comments, corrections, or suggestions. In large classes students can stay in their groups, then compare their papers with those of another group while the teacher moves among groups, giving help and direction as needed.
4. Play the segment again while students watch. As with the song recording, any of the following variations are possible, depending on class proficiency level, teacher goals, and other constraints:

- Play the tape as students read along, then ask them in groups to compare their earlier expectations with what they marked and the possible reasons for discrepancies.
- Play the tape as groups report. After one student or group presents a sentence, play the tape for immediate feedback and comparison of the student's version with the "real" version. Practice the sentence with the class, then play the sentence on the tape again as students speak along, matching the speaker as closely as possible. Then have students say the sentence one more time without the tape.

This micro focus may seem rather mechanical and boring on paper. However, in practice it is entertaining and extremely effective in bringing about immediate and noticeable improvement. Students immediately sound much more fluent when they get the intonation, stress, and reduction right. Equally important, they hear it and revel in their successes.

As with the song, ask individual students or groups to select specific words or phrases to listen for as the tape plays (without reading along on the script). Then play the tape and have groups report on what they anticipated versus what they actually heard.

5. To integrate grammar practice with pronunciation using a video segment, choose a cloze activity. Cloze exercises can range from tightly structured ones focusing on modal verbs, prepositions, or phrasal verbs to more open-ended exercises having to do with idiomatic expressions or reduced utterances.

Whatever the focus, have students fill in what they think should or could go in the blank spaces. In the case of prepositions, the benefit is that the activities focus on particular collocations and, when the tape is played again for comparison, on their reduction in natural speech. With this cloze exercise, the point is not that students figure out, remember, or guess what the original words were. It is also that they focus on what the answers could be—that is what would fit the context not only semantically or grammatically, but also in register.

When students watch the tape again, they often become aware that the actor has reduced the word so much or dropped the sentence-ending pitch so low that it is difficult to determine exactly what was said. Acknowledging this helps students realize that even native speakers (NS) do not always understand everything, nor do they attempt to; rather, NS decipher and fill in from context and from knowledge of grammar. An added advantage of this explanation is that students can see an immediate and practical benefit to learning grammar.

As a final activity several students may present the entire script or they can write their own short dialogues based on vocabulary that emerged from the cloze exercise, making sure to use their best American intonation on every phrase. They can present their dialogues to the class or record them on tape at home and submit them to the teacher to listen to and comment on.

## Conclusion

ESL/EFL students often believe that getting the sounds right is the most important aspect of pronunciation. Thus, they may think that improving their control over vowels and consonants and pronouncing every sound in a word will make them sound more American. While there is no

denying the importance of the segmentals, it often takes some time to convince students that the suprasegmentals, particularly linking and intonation, are equally important. Indeed, they are crucial to both students' comprehension of others' speech as well as to their own intelligibility. Even when students accept the importance of suprasegmentals, they are dismayed by what they perceive as a lack of rules or regularity associated with these elements. They discover, for example, that, unlike sounds, suprasegmentals can change according to meaning.

These activities address students' needs and desires to improve their listening proficiency and pronunciation in four ways. First, they expose students to hearing prosodic elements in connected speech in an entertaining and useful manner. Second, they help students learn how to listen to connected speech. Third, by listening then comparing what they hear with a script, they improve both their aural and visual modalities and, fourth, learn to listen for meaningful word groups and phrases instead of continuing the word-for-word listening many of them have learned. Developing and practicing new listening strategies in the classroom will lead to continued improvement in comprehending and speaking English outside the class.

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